

Reflections on the implementation of the Gifted and Talented policy in England, 1999–2011

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Introduction

This paper, as part of an on-going study looking at the impact of gifted and talented policies on an inner-city school, explores the role of the local authority in implementing the various gifted and talented initiatives since 1999, when local authority gifted and talented co-ordinators were first appointed under the Excellence in Cities (DfEE, 1999) programme.

Gifted and Talented policies have been controversial, with different viewpoints about labelling, for example, by researchers (Claxton and Meadows, 2009) and within the teaching profession (Radnor, Koshy and Taylor, 2007). However, there is broad agreement that provision needs to be in place for the most able pupils.

Ensuring that the brightest pupils fulfil their potential goes straight to the heart of social mobility, of basic fairness and economic efficiency.
(Smithers and Robinson, 2012)

For these reasons, despite the current lack of government policy relating to the most able students in the UK currently, addressing the needs of the gifted and talented remains an important focus for schools.

Context

Government papers over the past decade and more have emphasised the need for equity and inclusivity in the education system (Excellence in Cities, 1999; Every Child Matters, 2003; Personalised Learning, 2004–2009). The aspiration of these policies were to increase inclusion - as Lowe (2003, 122) put it, writing about the Excellence in Cities initiative “aspire to achieving the dual notions of equity and excellence for all pupils.” However some writers (Bonshek, 2002; Haight, 2005) have argued that the needs of gifted and talented have been marginalised. Over this period, many reports from the Select Committee’s Third Report (1999) to the Sutton Trust Report (Smithers and Robinson, 2012) have found that the needs of gifted pupils are frequently not being met in schools, and that there is evidence of under-achievement of this group.

The Excellence in Cities (1999) was designed to improve educational opportunities for children in socially deprived areas, via different strands, one of which was the gifted and talented strand. Funding was given to implement these new policies, and local authorities appointed advisors, to assist schools, who had also appointed gifted and talented co-ordinators, in developing provision for gifted pupils. Generally provision could be classified into two types – provision in the classroom, and extra curricular

provision outside the classroom, such as masterclasses and other “trips” arranged by the local authority.

In 2002, The National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY) was set up at the University of Warwick, funded for five years. This provided summer schools and other support for gifted pupils in the secondary sector. This contract ended in 2007, which was followed by The Young Gifted and Talented Learner Academy (YG&T) for 4-19-year-olds set up and run by the CfBT Education Trust. The local authority advisors were not involved in either NAGTY or YG&T.

At this point in 2007, the Government brought in a National Strategy for gifted and talented pupils, to join other existing strategy programmes. Again local authority advisors had a key role in implementing this, although this time there was no funding. Local authorities and schools that previously had not been involved in gifted and talented initiatives, as they were not in Excellence in Cities areas, now had to make provision for this group of pupils. However, in March 2011 the National Strategy came to an end, and since then there has been no government policy regarding gifted and talented policy per se.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to learn more about the perspective of the local authority, who had a vital role in bridging the gap between government policy and practice in schools. Much of the literature has focused on practice in schools, although many gifted and talented co-ordinators have acknowledged the importance of local authority advisors in helping them develop provision in their schools - in fact Smithers and Robertson (2012) found that it was the most frequently mentioned source of support for schools. Equally, submissions to the House of Commons Select Committee (2010) described the success in some areas of the local authority gifted and talented advisors, stating that where they had not been successful, it was because they had not been given the clout or the funding to give support.

The support given to schools has been wide-ranging, from helping schools with Quality Standard audits, to reflecting on provision, as well as facilitating cluster meetings for gifted and talented co-ordinators. Many of these posts have gone, along with the strategy, and now services are “traded” – i.e. schools now have to pay for services that were previously provided free of charge, and therefore gifted and talented co-ordinators will have to compete for funding with other areas of school funding, which will provide a stark tests as to whether attitudes towards gifted and talented education have changed widely, from the resistance that has been documented previously (Radnor, Koshy and Taylor, 2007).

The role of a local authority advisor is a multi-faceted one. It is not merely “head office” (Audit Commission, 1998) – they must wear many hats, directing, advocating and judging. They need to balance pressure with support. At the same time they have to articulate a vision – in the case of gifted and talented advisors, ensuring the Excellence in Cities initiative and National Strategy were translated into the school context. But they are also an important vehicle for improvement in schools.

This study aims to explore the role of the local authority gifted and talented advisor. It looked at one specific, but broad, question - what were the obstacles and challenges that have been afforded by the various initiatives in this area in the view of the local authority advisor?

Method of enquiry

This study is part of a larger research project, looking at the impact of the gifted and talented policies on an inner-city school. Examining the role of the local authority advisor has been a way of giving a greater context to the larger study. However, this is a very small case study, which is a limitation of the study.

The method used for the research is that of a case study. Much of the research around the impact of gifted education has focused primarily data that is either quantitative in nature, or qualitative data from a number of settings (e.g. Ofsted reports 2001, 2009). It was therefore decided that an in-depth analysis of one institution would afford an opportunity to explore the views of a variety of stakeholders in depth, including those who do not see themselves as pivotal to the implementation of gifted and talented policy in school.

Data sources and analysis

Qualitative methods were used in this research. The methods used were in-depth semi-structured interview and documentary analysis. Of particular interest to this study was a Select Committee report (2010) on the Gifted and Talented programme, where amongst others, local advisors in gifted education gave evidence about their views of the impact of gifted and talented policy. One interview of one and half hour's duration was conducted with the local authority gifted and talented advisor. The sample of one was inevitable, as there is only one advisor for gifted and talented per borough, and therefore included in the case studied. However, the small sample is a limitation of this study.

The local authority advisor had been in post since the first appointments under the Excellence in Cities (1999) initiative. She therefore had first hand experience of all the gifted and talented policies that had been brought in since that date, as outlined in the introduction. At the time of the interview (2010), her position was in a state of uncertainty, with the end of the strategy as well as no further funding from Excellence in Cities, which allowed reflection on the gifted and talented "journey" since 1999. She also was able to speculate about what the future would bring, although, of course, now schools are actually experiencing the consequences of the lack of government direction, and in that respect will now know what the advisor, at the time of interview could not.

In line with the ethical guidance at Brunel University, participating in the research was strictly voluntary, and the participant could withdraw from the project at any time. Her identity has been kept anonymous. In respect of the validity of the project, as well as a reassurance to her, she was asked to read the transcript of the interview, and make corrections where appropriate, which she did.

Data analysis consisted of identifying emerging themes from both the documentary analysis and the interview, which had been transcribed (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Particular attention was paid to a number of themes which emerged from both the documentation and the interview.

Findings and Discussion

The themes identified in the data analysis have been reported here in the form of obstacles and opportunities for the local authority advisor from the gifted and talented policies in promoting gifted education.

Obstacles

The term “gifted and talented”

Excellence in Cities (1999) identified the need for “gifted and talented” children in school to be identified and provided for in schools. However, there are tensions with this model, not the least that gifted means exceptional talent to many people, not something that can be contrived into a percentage of any cohort, as stipulated by this policy.

The term “gifted and talented” has tended to create a resistance amongst the teaching profession and researchers alike and has been widely discussed in the literature (Smithers and Robinson, 2012). Freeman (1998) describes her objections to the term, even before the Excellence in Cities policy was introduced, in that the word implies gifts bestowed intact from on high, and has connotations of personality and emotional issues. Like many writers, she prefers the term “very able” Likewise the Select Committee (1999) adopted the term “highly able”, justifying this by saying that the DfEE (as the government department for education was called at that time), used the term synonymously with a range of terms from very able to exceptionally able.

This view was reported in the House of Commons Select Committee (2010), where one witness stated that many teachers are “not confident about the G&T word” (Ev 5).

The local authority advisor also saw the terminology as a barrier, particularly in the early stages of the initiative. She said:

Terminology was a big issue right from the start. Always has been – the use of the word gifted. Apparently lots of advice to the DCSF not to use the term in the first instance, from a lot of people. They didn’t take advice and so it’s caused a lot of problems, because people think of gifted as being a very small percentage, you know, that you might see once in a lifetime.

Balchin (2009) states that prior to the Excellence in Cities (1999) initiative, the usual term used for this group was “very able” and comments that “it would be very useful to find out why the new terminology was put in place” (p.50). Equally Koshy, Pinheiro-

Torres and Portman- Smith (2010) noted that they had found not much change since an earlier survey (Thomas, Casey and Koshy, 1996) and that 62% of teachers felt uncomfortable labelling children as gifted, preferring the term “more able”.

The ambiguity inherent in the term and the connotations associated with it have contributed to resistance to teachers embracing the policy, and this has formed a barrier, which the local authority advisor had to address to ensure the initiative was successful. She said:

Part of the battle in those days was getting people to understand that it wasn't about that but about the more able in their schools. That was a hindrance without a doubt.

Elitism

Another issue that the local authority advisor has had to face is that of teacher attitude. Much has been written about teacher attitude to gifted and talented policy (Lowe, 2003; Radnor, Koshy and Taylor, 2007). There are perceived tensions between the notions of “equity” and “excellence” (Lowe, 2003). Nor is this just a feature of the British educational system – Rotigel (2003) reported similar attitudes in the United States, where programmes for the gifted and talented child are seen as elitist on the grounds that “the gifted and talented child already has so much” (211).

Radnor, Koshy and Taylor (2007) looked at how students were selected for the Urban Scholars programme, an intervention for gifted students from nine participating London boroughs at Brunel University. They found that participants were ambivalent about selecting pupils for extra resources, as this did not fit in with their own educational philosophies. In addition they had concerns about the identification of gifted and talented students, which did not reflect the social and ethnic mix of their school populations.

Research by the DSCF (2009) confirms the gifted and talented cohort does not reflect the ethnic mix of school populations. A witness to the Select Committee (House of Commons, 2010) quoted an Ofsted (2009) report in showing that there was a disproportionate number of wealthier pupils in gifted and talented cohorts, despite more sophisticated methods of identification. They also identified a culture of “it's not cool to be bright” as a factor (Ev 8).

The policy views gifted and talentedness as a relative concept, demonstrated by requiring schools to select the top 5-10% of their most able pupils for their registers, even if those pupils do not compare as having equal ability to the top 5-10% of pupils from another school. Elitism is also addressed within the policy by requiring schools to select pupils who are both gifted (i.e. academically able) as well as talented (including arts and sports). However, a smaller proportion of talented pupils are identified and the evaluation of the National Academy (DCSF, 2009) found that relatively little was provided by NAGTY for talented pupils, giving the impression that provision for talented pupils is of less concern than for gifted pupils.

For the local authority advisor interviewed, some of the issues with teacher attitudes have been more about a focus on the less able and floor targets, with less attention to the more able. She believes that attitudes have changed during the course of the policy in both teachers and parents.

The biggest impact right from the start was changing people's attitudes, which was, instead of thinking only about the less able or thinking about floor targets, they had to think about the more able. The battle has not been totally won, but I do think attitudes from schools and parents have changed dramatically.

This echoes a witness to the Select Committee (House of Commons, 2010) who reported "The sooner gifted and talented stops being seen as an elitist issue and starts being seen as an equal opportunities issue the better" (Ev 2).

Too many initiatives

The Select Report (2010) identified too many initiatives as one of the obstacles to the smooth delivery of gifted and talented education. One of the witnesses, Sue Mordecai, a local authority advisor, summed up her views that there were good intentions, but too many programmes and initiatives, with a lack of ideological and philosophical underpinning and research behind them. Another witness, Deborah Eyre, refers to the policy as being "incoherent and inconsistent" (Ev 2). In her view, there were too many stakeholders who were either not working together, or working in opposition to one another. Agreeing with this, Sue Mordecai urged that future funding should be designed to provide greater alignment of organisations, to bring it together, rather than create something new. There is a frustration that initiatives were not in existence long enough to ensure their success. She said:

Just as you start to get things right, they seem to disappear, but there you go. (Ev 10)

The local authority advisor reflects this in her comments about the demise of London Gifted and Talented, an organisation that supported schools with on-line materials and training, when she says:

London Gifted and Talented was dreadful for the first few years,..... But then it was transformed and was running really successful, but as soon as it was running really successfully, it was stopped. That's what happens – there's no continuity.....We just need – whatever government is in we just need a period where things are allowed to consolidate.

In addition to initiatives within the gifted and talented arena, there is also competition with other initiatives. The Select Committee (House of Commons, 2010) heard that there were too many things going on, and that is why things had gone off the boil. For the classroom teacher there is continual bombardment from the Government of initiatives encompassing a whole range of areas. As the local authority advisor put it:

I go to a staff meeting, and they do PMI the next day. The next week, they have another staff meeting about safeguarding, and they forget all about G&T.

Low priority given to Gifted and Talented Education in Schools

Linked to the issue of too many initiatives, is how schools prioritise in the face of this. The Select Committee (House of Commons, 2010) heard that the reasons why most schools have failed to make the required progress in provision for gifted pupils. Amongst these reasons are a lack of sympathy for the agenda and a low priority in schools for this policy.

The issues of teacher attitude and elitism have also impacted on schools giving this policy priority (House of Commons, 2010). It was reported that schools did not understand what gifted and talented means and were not prepared to put the programmes in place to cater for the needs of the children in this group. The message that was given to gifted and talented co-ordinators in their training that “What is good for gifted children is good for all children, but what is good for all children may not necessarily be enough for gifted and talented” (Ev 4) has not been taken up by all schools.

For schools that received funding, there was a strong incentive to begin to prioritise the policy, but many schools did not receive funding. Funding also gave the local authority advisor some leverage, if schools dragged their feet.

So it did happen with one primary and on secondary school they were doing things like they didn't have a leading teacher, or things weren't happening that should be happening. I did on one or two occasions threaten to withhold money, but I never actually had to do it. Threatening to withhold money definitely has the desired effect.

Another reason for the policy being given low priority identified by the local authority advisor was league tables and SATs, which create a culture of getting the lowest above the threshold of Level 4, whilst being satisfied with the more able being able to attain Level 5. Until 2012, there had been no official testing for Level 6 for some years, which was a great disincentive for schools to think about teaching beyond Level 5. The local authority advisor said:

The main thing with gifted and talented education as far as I can see is this major focus on league tables, the major focus on Level 4s at Key Stage 2 and Level 2 at Key Stage 1. All of that and just the focus on teaching to the test. Until that changes in some way, until the systems of assessment are different, then you're never going to get really good teaching for the more able. I'm convinced of it. It's probably worse in secondary than primary.

Opportunities

Alongside obstacles that have hindered implementation of gifted and talented education over the past decade, there have been opportunities, which have ensured that provision for gifted and talented students has improved more during this period, than at any time before.

Funding

First of the opportunities has been the funding arrangements for gifted and talented education. The first funding for gifted and talented initiatives came through Excellence in Cities (DfEE, 1999; Dracup, 2003). The money was ring-fenced – the advisor recalled “huge” amounts of ring-fenced money going to schools – about £35,000 for secondary schools and £10,000 for primary schools. This was targeted at the most deprived schools in her borough – all those schools with 35% or more of pupils on free school meals. Clearly only boroughs in receipt of Excellence in Cities money were beneficiaries of this funding.

One of the main reasons for the improvement in provision for gifted pupils was this funding. Even though it was distributed selectively, it has led to the creation of important projects and a greater awareness of the needs of gifted and talented pupils. Therefore funding should be seen as a major opportunity for the policy.

Part of the evidence for this, are in the views of those not working in the areas receiving the funding. In her memorandum to the House of Commons Select Committee, Joy Blaker, a Local Authority Advisor from Rotherham, which did not receive funding, cited the lack of ring-fenced funding as a factor weakening her role.

The Local Authority Advisor said:

So the funding was very generous and really effective and it made all the difference.....I was given a central budget to run the Complementary Studies Programme for primaries and secondaries, and then the rest was devolved to schools.

When the National Strategy was introduced in 2007, no funding came with it. Although funding was retained in this local authority for gifted and talented education, it was a smaller budget than under Excellence in Cities. She faced the prospect of that funding coming to an end, and having to rely on “trading” after that, with schools paying for the services they use. She said:

After that it will be traded, in other words, you will have to earn – whatever you’re organising, you have to charge for that. I have a big problem with that. I think that schools should be entitled to a basic level of support.

Whether or not schools will see this as a priority for spending remains to be seen. The local authority advisor’s view is that some schools might pay, but the schools who really need the support are less likely to use her if they have to pay. The one point of leverage she can see is the expectation in Ofsted inspections that gifted and talented pupils are well provided for (echoed in submissions to the Select Committee, 2010, where this is

described as a strong accountability model through Ofsted), although there is no training in gifted and talented education for Ofsted inspectors.

And now there will be a bit more observation in the classroom and that will show up (if they know what they're looking for) and will show up what's happening in the classroom, It's not a perfect system, but it's all we've got, isn't it? It's a straw to cling on to really.

Extra-curricular provision vs classroom provision

One of the benefits that ring-fenced funding brought was the creation of a variety of enrichment projects, specially designed for gifted and talented pupils. Such funding was not provided, of course with the National Strategy, and so in-class teaching became more the focus of provision, looking at appropriate differentiation.

This was welcomed by the local authority advisor on one level, because she had felt that too much attention had been paid to extra provision, and not enough to the classroom. Rotigel (2003) makes the point that every child has the right to learn something new every day in school, and the classroom is where they spend most of their time. They should not need extra activities to do this.

In its report (2003), Ofsted found in almost all schools visited, the initiative has increased the number of extension and enrichment activities for pupils who would not otherwise have had access to these opportunities, and that was having a positive effect on achievement. However, they found that the critical issue for most schools is how to embed strategies for developing gifted and talented pupils more firmly in the mainstream curriculum. The local authority advisor reflected this position when she said:

One of the disadvantages [of Excellence in Cities] was that in the early days people saw it as a sort of add-on thing. Because we had such a big programme of enrichment and extension, people saw that as what it was all about, whereas that's never been the case. Right from the start, a large part of my job has been looking at what is happening in the classroom. But people never seemed to fix on that, not even at local authority [level].

Because the central focus of the Strategy was teaching and learning, it helped break down some of the previous assumptions associated with gifted and talented provision. But, as highlighted by the Select Committee (2010) not all teachers have the skills to have the skills and knowledge to teach the more able pupils effectively. Leading teachers, who received the National Training Programme for Leading Teachers would have the skills to do this, but it is unlikely that many have managed to cascade this to all the teachers in their school.

However, is differentiation sufficient? Enrichment can take the form of programmes within schools, borough-wide or national. These activities give selected pupils a chance to mix with other pupils of similar abilities and interests, which cannot always be provided for within schools, particularly at primary level.

Eyre (2001) discusses the pros and cons of classroom based as against separate provision for pupils. Whilst reiterating the point that all pupils need appropriate provision in the classroom, there are advantages to targeted enrichment activities. These include offering activities that are unsuitable for the majority of pupils, being able to accelerate pace and complexity, giving the opportunity to work with their intellectual peers and reducing the feelings of intellectual isolation. The main issue, written about widely in gifted and talented literature (e.g. Haight, 2005; Freeman, 1998), is that the difficulty in finding a failsafe method for accurate identification of the right students to benefit from these programmes.

The National Training Programme for Leading Teachers

One of the principle ways of disseminating training for school gifted and talented co-ordinators was the National Programme for Leading Teachers in Gifted and Talented Education. This was highly thought of by the local authority advisor, who said:

Then when the strategy took over, we had this big fuss for one year about the Leading Teacher Training Programme. You were expected to train a leading teacher in two half days, which I thought was pretty incredible. Compare that with the five days training we've had. We did the four days, then obviously continued with the four day course as well.

This view was reflected by a local authority advisor witness to the Select committee, who said (Ev 12) that the Leading Teachers programme was a factor that had strengthened her role. However the government strategy was to train teachers who would then cascade the training within the school setting. It is difficult to know whether she was pleased with the outcome of the training for the co-ordinators, or whether she was involved with how well the training was taken up by other teachers in schools.

Conclusions

Through the eyes of local authority advisor the national initiatives for gifted and talented education have revealed a picture of patchiness. On the one hand an opportunity was given through both policy and funding to create new programmes and address the lack of knowledge and skills in teachers in meeting the needs of more able students. On the other hand, these opportunities were hindered by the attitudes of teachers to gifted education with its reputation for elitism, by the term itself which confused people and did not really describe the population that the initiatives aimed to target. A culture of meeting targets in order to maximise a place in the league tables is also seen as a disincentive to give gifted children more opportunities in more creative activities, using skills that are not really called for in tests.

Part of the role of the local authority advisors has been to make sense of these contradictions. In the case of the local authority advisor interviewed this was facilitated by ring-fenced funding through Excellence in Cities (1999) and a subsequent to fund her post and some of her Complementary Studies Programme after this ended.

However, as the report by Smithers and Robinson (2012) shows, many advisors posts have gone – or are perceived as gone by schools.

There is hope by advisors that Ofsted inspections will provide some pressure for schools to ensure that they continue to provide for this group of pupils. This view is shared by Professor Stannard, National Champion of Gifted and Talented Learners, as given to the Select Committee (2010).

The present government position is that schools will now provide for gifted and talented pupils. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (House of Commons, 2010) told the Select Committee that the government believed that support for gifted and talented pupils should now be school-led. The Five- Year Strategy (DfES, 2006) incorporating the policy of Personalised Learning (DfES, 2004) has led the Government to believe that the interests of gifted and talented pupils can be served through the implementation of this policy. John Coles, Director General for Schools, told the Select Committee:

The things that are different are, first, the underlying capacity of the system and its focus on this issue. What the past ten years have done is create a much sharper focus of this issue. There is an even greater understanding in schools. There is an expectation that everybody has a lead teacher for gifted and talented. There is an expectation that local authorities have gifted and talented co-ordinators. It has status and a focus in the system.

Whilst it would appear that there is a sharper focus on this issue than there was ten years ago, there seems to be evidence that the policy is not sufficiently embedded to live up to some of his claims. One of the key lessons to be learnt from the initiatives is the length of time it takes to change attitudes and bring in new ideas. Teacher attitudes take a long time to change, but there is evidence from this study, that they can be changed. Equally it takes time for new initiatives to find the right leadership and strategy to make a significant impact. At present, the gifted and talented policies have changed more rapidly than professionals could realistically implement them. More time is needed to embed the policy nationally, otherwise there is a risk that it will revert to patchy provision, where only committed, well-trained and charismatic individuals will be able to keep the impetus of the initiative alive in their schools.

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